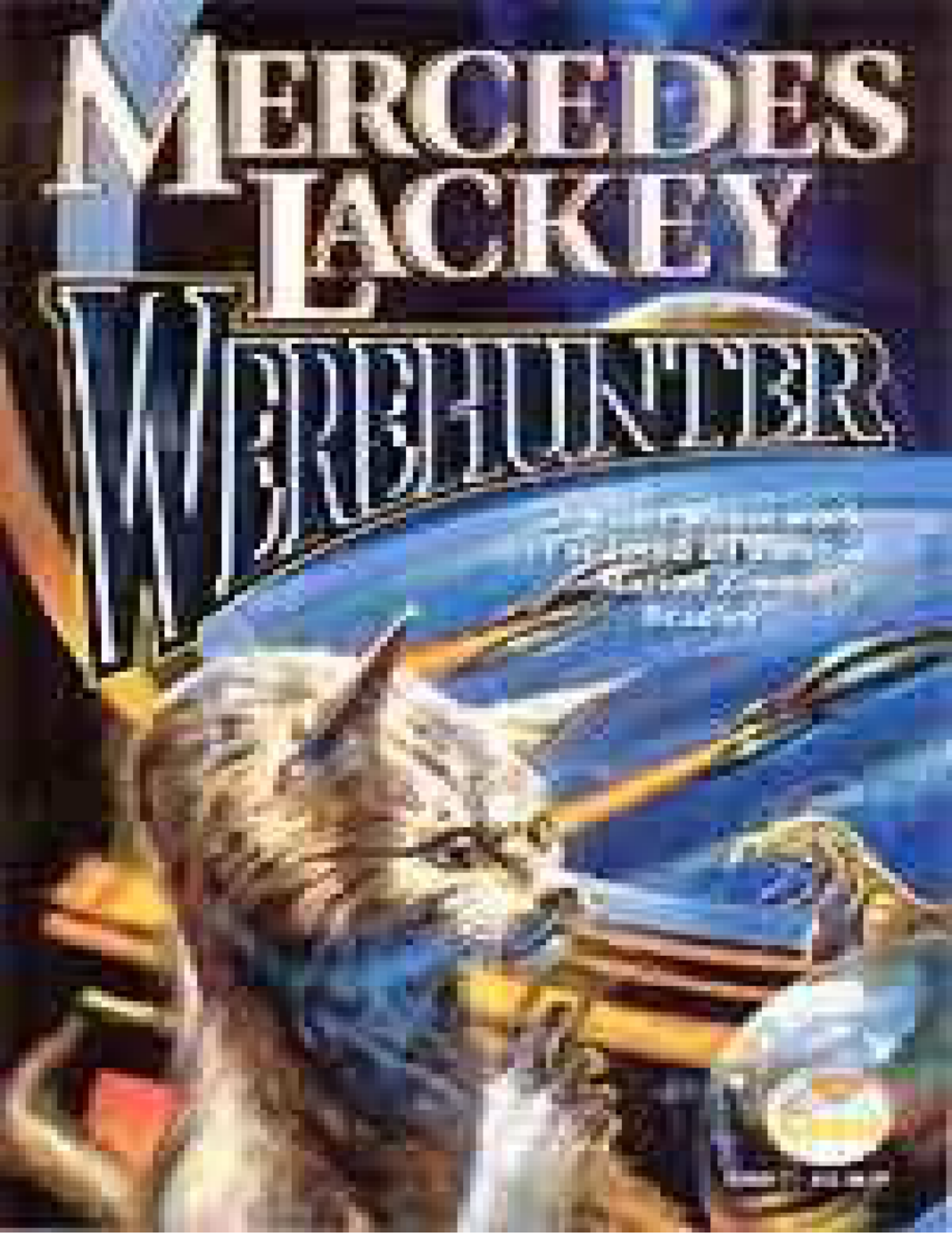
MERCEDES
LACKEY
WERHUNTER

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- A Tail of Two SKittys

A Tail of Two SKittys

The four SKitty stories appeared in Cat Fantastic Anthologies edited by Andre Norton. I'm very, very fond of SKitty; it might seem odd for a bird person to be fond of cats, but I am, so there it is. I was actually a cat-person before I was a bird-mother, and I do have two cats, both Siamese-mix, both rather old and very slow. Just, if the other local cats poach too often at my bird feeders, they can expect to get a surprise from the garden-hose.

The howls coming from inside the special animal shipping crate sounded impatient, and had been enough to seriously alarm the cargo handlers. Dick White, Spaceman First Class, Supercargo on the CatsEye Company ship *Brightwing,* put his hand on the outside of the plastile crate, just above the word "Property." From within the crate the muffled voice continued to yowl general unhappiness with the world.

Tell her that it's all right, SKitty, he thought at the black form that lay over his shoulders like a living fur collar. *Tell her I'll have her out in a minute. I don't want her to come bolting out of there and hide the minute I crack the crate.*

SKitty raised her head. Yellow eyes blinked once, sleepily. Abruptly, the yowling stopped.

:She fine,: SKitty said, and yawned, showing a full mouth of needle-pointed teeth. *:Only young, scared. I think she make good mate for Furrball.:*

Dick shook his head; the kittens were not even a year old, and already their mother was matchmaking. Then again, that *was* the tendency of mothers the universe over.

At least now he'd be able to uncrate this would-be "mate" with a minimum of fuss.

The full legend imprinted on the crate read "Female Shipscat Astra Stardancer of Englewood, Property of BioTech Interstellar, leased to CatsEye Company. Do not open under penalty of law." Theoretically, Astra was, like SKitty, a bio-engineered shipscat, fully capable of handling freefall, alien vermin, conditions that would poison, paralyze, or terrify her remote Terran ancestors, and all without turning a hair. In actuality, Astra, like the nineteen other

shipscats Dick had uncrated, was a failure. The genetic engineering of her middle-ear and other balancing organs had failed. She could not tolerate freefall, and while most ships operated under grav-generators, there were always equipment malfunctions and accidents.

That made her and her fellows failures by BioTech standards. A shipscat that could not handle freefall was not a shipscat.

Normally, kittens that washed out in training were adopted out to carefully selected planet- or station-bound families of BioTech employees. However, this was not a "normal" circumstance by any stretch of the imagination.

The world of the Lacu'un, graceful, bipedal humanoids with a remarkably sophisticated, if planet-bound, civilization, was infested with a pest called a "kreshta." Erica Makumba, the Legal Advisor and Security Chief of Dick's ship described them as "six-legged crosses between cockroaches and mice." SKitty described them only as "nasty," but she hunted them gleefully anyway. The Lacu'un opened their world to trade just over a year ago, and some of their artifacts and technologies made them a desirable trade-ally indeed. The *Brightwing* had been one of the three ships invited to negotiate, in part because of SKitty, for the Lacu'un valued totemic animals highly.

And that was what had led to Captain Singh of the *Brightwing* conducting the entire trade negotiations with the Lacu'un—and had kept *Brightwing* ground-bound for the past year. SKitty had done the—to the Lacu'un—impossible. She had killed kreshta. She had already been assumed to be *Brightwing*'s totemic animal; that act elevated her to the status of "god-touched miracle," and had given the captain and crew of her ship unprecedented control and access to the rulers here.

SKitty had been newly-pregnant at the time; part of the price for the power Captain Singh now wielded had been her kittens. But Dick had gotten another idea, and had used his own share of the profits *Brightwing* was taking in to purchase the leases of twenty more "failed" cats to supplement SKitty's four kittens. BioTech cats released for leases were generally sterile, SKitty being a rare exception. If these twenty worked out, the Lacu'un would be very grateful, and more importantly, so would Vena Ferducci, the attractive, petite Terran Consul assigned to the new embassy here. In the past few months, Dick had gotten to know Vena very well—and he hoped to get to know her better. Vena had originally been a Survey Scout, and she was getting rather restless in her ground-based position as Consul. And in truth, the Lacu'un lawyer, Lan Ventris, was much better suited to such a job than Vena. She had hinted that as soon as the Lacu'un felt they could trust Ventris, she would like to resign and go back to space. Dick rather hoped she might be persuaded to take a position with the *Brightwing*. It was too soon to call this little dance a

“romance,” but he had hopes. . . .

Hopes which could be solidified by this experiment. If the twenty young cats he had imported worked out as well as SKitty’s four half-grown kittens, the Lacu’un would be able to import their intelligent pest-killers at a fraction of what the lease on a shipscat would be. This would make Vena happy; anything that benefited her Lacu’un made her happy. And if Dick was the cause of that happiness. . . .

:Dick go courting?: SKitty asked innocently, salting her query with decidedly *not*-innocent images of her own “courting.”

Dick blushed. *No courting,* he thought firmly. *Not yet, anyway.*

:Silly,: SKitty replied scornfully. The overtones of her thoughts were—why waste such a golden opportunity? Dick did not answer her.

Instead, he thumbed the lock on the crate, a lock keyed to his DNA only. A tiny prickle was the only indication that the lock had taken a sample of his skin for comparison, but a moment later a hairline-thin crack appeared around the front end of the crate, and Dick carefully opened the door and looked inside.

A pair of big green eyes in a pointed gray face looked out at him from the shadows. “Meowrrrr?” said a tentative voice.

Tell her it’s all right, SKitty, he thought, extending a hand for Astra to sniff. It was too bad that his telepathic connection with SKitty did not extend to these other cats, but she seemed to be able to relay everything he needed to tell them.

Astra sniffed his fingers daintily, and oozed out of the crate, belly to the floor. After a moment though, a moment during which SKitty stared at her so hard that Dick was fairly certain his little friend was communicating any number of things to the newcomer, Astra stood up and looked around, her ears coming up and her muscles relaxing. Finally she looked up at Dick and blinked.

“Prrow,” she said. He didn’t need SKitty’s translation to read that. He held out his arms and the young cat leapt into them, to be carried in regal dignity out of the Quarantine area.

As he turned away from the crate, he thought he caught a hint of movement in the shadows at the back. But when he turned to look, there was nothing there, and he dismissed it as nothing more than his imagination. If there *had* been anything else in Astra’s crate, the manifest would have listed it—and Astra was definitely sterile, so it could not have been an unlicensed kitten.

Erica Makumba and Vena were waiting for him in the corridor outside. Vena offered her fingers to the newcomer; much more secure now, Astra sniffed them and purred. “She’s lovely,” Vena said in admiration. Dick had to agree; Astra was a velvety blue-gray from head to tail, and her slim, clean lines clearly showed her descent from

Russian Blue ancestors.

:She for Furrball,: SKitty insisted, gently nipping at his neck.

Is this your idea or hers? Dick retorted.

:Sees Furrball in head; likes Furrball.: That seemed to finish it as far as SKitty was concerned. *:Good hunter, too.:* Dick gave in to the inevitable.

"Didn't we promise one of these new cats to the Lacu'teveras?" Dick asked. "This one seems very gentle; she'd probably do very well as a companion for Furrball." SKitty's kittens all had names as fancy as Astra's—or as SKitty's official name, for that matter. Furrball was "Andreas Widefarer of Lacu'un," Nuisance was "Misty Snowspirit of Lacu'un," Rags was "Lady Flamebringer of Lacu'un" and Trey was "Garrison Starshadow of Lacu'un." But they had, as cats always do, acquired their own nicknames that had nothing to do with the registered names. Astra would without a doubt do the same.

Each of the most prominent families of the Lacu'un had been granted one cat, but the Royal Family had three. Two of SKitty's original kittens, and one of the newcomers. Astra would bring that number up to four, a sacred number to the Lacu'un and very propitious.

"We did," Vena replied absently, scratching a pleased Astra beneath her chin. "And I agree with you; I think this one would please the Lacu'teveras very much." She laughed a little. "I'm beginning to think you're psychic or something, Dick; you haven't been wrong with your selections yet."

"Me?" he said ingenuously. "Psychic? Spirits of Space, Vena, the way these people are treating the cats, it doesn't matter anyway. Any 'match' I made would be a good one, so far as the cat is concerned. They couldn't be pampered more if they were Lacu'un girl-babies!"

"True," she agreed, and reluctantly took her hand away. "Well, four cats should be just about right to keep the Palace vermin-free. It's really kind of funny how they've divided the place up among them with no bickering. They almost act as if they were humans dividing up patrols!" Erica shot him an unreadable glance; did she remember how he had sat down with the original three and SKitty—and a floor-plan of the place—when he first brought them all to the Palace?

"They are bred for high intelligence," he reminded both of them hastily. "No one really knows how bright they are. They're bright enough to use their life-support pods in an emergency, and bright enough to learn how to use the human facilities in the ships. They seem to have ways of communicating with each other, or so the people at BioTech tell me, so maybe they did establish patrols."

"Well, maybe they did," Erica said after a long moment. He heaved a mental sigh of relief. The last thing he needed was to have

someone suspect SKitty's telepathic link with him. BioTech was not breeding for telepathy, but if such a useful trait ever showed up in a *fertile* female, they would surely cancel *Brightwing*'s lease and haul SKitty back to their nearest cattery to become a breeding queen. SKitty was his best friend; to lose her like that would be terrible.

:No breeding,: SKitty said firmly. *:Love Dick, love ship. No breeding; breeding dull, kittens a pain. Not leave ship ever.:*

Well, at least SKitty agreed.

For now, anyway, now that her kittens were weaned. Whenever she came into season, she seemed to change her mind, at least about the part that resulted in breeding, if not the breeding itself.

The Lacu'teveras, the Ruling Consort of her people, accepted Astra into the household with soft cries of welcome and gladness. Erica was right, the Lacu'un could not possibly have pampered their cats more. Whenever a cat wanted a lap or a scratch, one was immediately provided, whether or not the object of feline affection was in the middle of negotiations or a session of Council or not. Whenever one wished to play—although with the number of kreshta about, there was very little energy left over for playing—everything else was set aside for that moment. And when one brought in a trophy kreshta, tail and ears held high with pride, the entire court applauded. Astra was introduced to Furrball at SKitty's insistence. Noses were sniffed, and the two rubbed cheeks. It appeared that Mama's matchmaking was going to work.

The three humans and the pleased feline headed back across the city to the spaceport and the Fence around it. The city of the Lacu'un was incredibly attractive, much more so than any other similar city Dick had ever visited. Because of the rapidity with which the kreshta multiplied given any food and shelter, the streets were kept absolutely spotless, and the buildings clean and in repair. Most had walls about them, giving the inhabitants little islands of privacy. The walls of the wealthy were of carved stone; those of the poor of cast concrete. In all cases, ornamentation was the rule, not the exception.

The Lacu'un themselves walked the streets of their city garbed in delicate, flowing robes, or shorter more practical versions of the same garments. Graceful and handsome, they resembled avians rather than reptiles; their skin varied in shade from a dark brown to a golden tan, and their heads bore a kind of frill like an iguana's, that ran from the base of the neck to a point just above and between the eyes.

Their faces were capable of something like a smile, and the expression meant the same for them as it did for humans. Most of them smiled when they saw Dick and SKitty; although the kreshta-destroying abilities of the cat were not something any of them would personally feel the impact of for many years, perhaps generations,

they still appreciated what the cats Dick had introduced could do. The kreshta had been a plague upon them for as long as their history recorded, even being so bold as to steal the food from plates and injure unguarded infants. For as long as that history, it had seemed that there would never be a solution to the depredations of the little beasts. But now—the most pious claimed the advent of the cats was a sign of the gods' direct intervention and blessing, and even the skeptics were thrilled at the thought that an end to the plague was in sight. It was unlikely that, even with a cat in every household, the kreshta would ever be destroyed—but such things as setting a guard on sleeping babies and locking meals in metal containers set into the tables could probably be eliminated.

When they crossed the Fence into Terran territory, however, the surroundings dropped in quality by a magnitude or two. Dick felt obscurely ashamed of his world whenever he looked at the shabby, garish spaceport "facilities" that comprised most of the Terran spaceport area. At least the headquarters that Captain Singh and CatsEye had established were handsome; adaptations of the natives' own architecture, in cast concrete with walls decorated with stylized stars, spaceships, and suggestions of slit-pupiled eyes. SolarQuest and UVN, the other two Companies that had been given Trade permits, were following CatsEye's lead, and had hired the same local architects and contractors to build their own headquarters. It looked from the half-finished buildings as if SolarQuest was going with a motif taken from their own logo of a stylized sunburst; UVN was going for geometrics in their wall-decor.

There were four ships here at the moment rather than the authorized three; for some reason, the independent freighter that had brought in the twenty shipscats was still here on the landing field. Dick wondered about that for a moment, then shrugged mentally. Independents often ran on shoestring budgets; probably they had only loaded enough fuel to get them here, and refueling was taking more time than they had thought it would.

Suddenly, just as they passed through the doors of the building, SKitty howled, hissed, and leapt from Dick's shoulders, vanishing through the rapidly-closing door.

He uttered a muffled curse and turned to run after her. What had gotten into her, anyway?

He found himself looking into the muzzle of a weapon held by a large man in the nondescript coveralls favored by the crew of that independent freighter. The man was as nondescript as his clothing, with ash-blond hair cut short and his very ordinary face—with the exception of that weapon, and the cold, calculating look in his iron-gray eyes. Dick put up his hands, slowly. He had the feeling this was a

very bad time to play hero.

"Where's the damn cat?" snapped the one Dick was coming to think of as "the Gray Man." One of his underlings shrugged.

"Gone," the man replied shortly. "She got away when we rounded up these three, and she just vanished somewhere. Forget the cat. How much damage could a cat do?"

The Gray Man shrugged. "The natives might get suspicious if they don't see her with our man."

"She probably wouldn't have cooperated with our man," the underling pointed out. "Not like she did with this one. It doesn't matter—White got the new cats installed, and we don't need an animal that was likely to be a handful anyway."

The Gray Man nodded after a while and went back to securing the latest of his prisoners. The offices in the new CatsEye building had been turned into impromptu cells; Dick had gotten a glimpse of Captain Singh in one of them as he had been frog-marched past. He didn't know what these people had done with the rest of the crew or with Vena and Erica, since Vena had been taken off somewhere separately and Erica had been stunned and dragged away without waiting for her surrender.

The Gray Man watched him with his weapon trained on him as two more underlings installed a tangle-field generator across the doorway. With no windows, these little offices made perfect holding-pens. Most of them didn't have furniture yet, those that did didn't really contain anything that could be used as a weapon. The desks were simple slabs of native wood on metal supports, the chairs molded plastile, and both were bolted to the floor. There was nothing in Dick's little cubicle that could even be thrown.

Dick was still trying to figure out who and what these people were, when something finally clicked. He looked up at the Gray Man. "You're from TriStar, aren't you?" he asked.

If the Gray Man was startled by this, he didn't show it. "Yes," the man replied, gun-muzzle never wavering. "How did you figure that out?"

"BioTech never ships with anyone other than TriStar if they can help it," Dick said flatly. "I wondered why they had hired a tramp-freighter to bring out their cats; it didn't seem like them, but then I thought maybe that was all they could get."

"You're clever, White," the Gray Man replied, expressionlessly. "Too clever for your own good, maybe. We might just have to make you disappear. You and the Makumba woman; she'll probably know some of us as soon as she wakes up, and we don't have the time or the equipment to brain-wipe you."

Dick felt a chill going down his back, as the men at the door

finished installing the field and left, quickly. “BioTech is going to wonder if one of their designated handlers just vanishes. And without me, you’re never going to get SKitty back; BioTech isn’t going to care for that, either. They might start asking questions that you can’t answer.”

The Gray Man stared at him for a long moment; his expression did not vary in the least, but at least he didn’t make any move to shoot. “I’ll think about it,” he said finally. He might have said more, but there was a shout from the corridor outside.

“*The cat!*” someone yelled, and the Gray Man was out of the door before Dick could blink. Unfortunately, he paused long enough to trigger the tangle-field before he ran off in pursuit of what could only have been SKitty.

Dick slumped down into the chair, and buried his face in his hands, but not in despair. He was thinking furiously.

TriStar didn’t like getting cut out of the negotiations; what they can’t get legally, they’ll get any way they can. Probably they intend to use us as hostages against Vena’s good behavior, getting her to put them up as the new negotiators. I solved the problem of getting the cats for them; now there’s no reason they couldn’t just step in. But that can’t go on forever, sooner or later Vena is going to get to a com unit or send some kind of message offworld. So what would these people do then?

TriStar had a reputation as being ruthless, and he’d heard from Erica that it was justified. So how do you get rid of an entire crew of a spaceship *and* the Terran Consul? And maybe the crews of the other two ships into the bargain?

Well, there was always one answer to that, especially on a newly-opened world. Plague.

The chill threaded his backbone again as he realized just what a good answer that was. These TriStar goons could use sickness as the excuse for why the CatsEye people weren’t in evidence. A rumor of plague might well drive the other two ships offworld before *they* came down with it. The TriStar people could even claim to be taking care of the *Brightwing*’s crew.

Then, after a couple of weeks, they all succumb to the disease, the Terran Consul with them. . . .

It was a story that would work, not only with the Terran authorities, but with the Lacu’un. The Fence was a very effective barrier to help from the natives; the Lacu’un would not cross it to find out the truth, even if they were suspicious.

I have to get to a com set, he thought desperately. His own usefulness would last only so long as it took them to trap SKitty and find some way of caging her. No one else, so far as he knew, could hear her thoughts. All they needed to do would be to catch her and

ship her back to BioTech, with the message that the designated handler was dead of plague and the cat had become unmanageable. It wouldn't have been the first time.

A soft hiss made him look up, and he strangled a cry of mingled joy and apprehension. It was SKitty! She was right outside the door, and she seemed to be trying to do something with the tangle-field generator.

SKitty! he thought at her as hard as he could. *SKitty, you have to get away from here, they're trying to catch you—* There was no way SKitty was going to be able to deal with those controls; they were deliberately made difficult to handle, just precisely because shipscats were known to be curious. And how could she know what complicated series of things to do to take down the field anyway?

But SKitty ignored him, using her stubby raccoon-like hands on the controls of the generator and hissing in frustration when the controls would not cooperate.

Finally, with a muffled yowl of triumph, she managed to twist the dial into the "off" position and the field went down. Dick was out the door in a moment, but SKitty was uncharacteristically running off ahead of him instead of waiting for him. Not that he minded! She was safer on the ground in case someone spotted him and stunned him; she was small and quick, and if they caught him again, she would still have a chance to hide and get away. But there was something odd about her bounding run; as if her body was a little longer than usual. And her tail seemed to be a lot longer than he remembered—

Never mind that, get moving! he scolded himself, trying to recall where they'd set up all the coms and if any of them were translight. SKitty whisked ahead of him, around a corner; when he caught up with her, she was already at work on the tangle-field generator in front of another door.

Practice must have made perfect; she got the field down just before he reached the doorway, and shot down the hall like a streak of black lightning. Dick stopped; inside was someone lying down on a cot, arm over her dark mahogany head. Erica!

"Erica!" he hissed at her. She sat bolt upright, wincing as she did so, and he felt a twinge of sympathy. A stun-migraine was no picnic.

She saw who was at the door, saw at the same moment that there was no tangle-field shimmer between them, and was on her feet and out in a fraction of a second. "How?" she demanded, scanning the corridor and finding it as curiously empty as Dick had.

"SKitty took the generator offline," he said. "She got yours, too, and she headed off that way—" He pointed towards the heart of the building. "Do you remember where the translight coms are?"

"Eyeah," she said. "In the basement, if we can get there. That's

the emergency unit and I don't think they know we've got it."

She cocked her head to one side, as if she had suddenly heard something. He strained his ears—and there was a clamor, off in the distance beyond the walls of the building. It sounded as if several people were chasing something. But it couldn't have been SKitty; she was still in the building.

"It sounds like they're busy," Erica said, and grinned. "Let's go while we have the chance!"

But before they reached the basement com room, they were joined by most of the crew of the *Brightwing,* some of whom had armed themselves with whatever might serve as a weapon. All of them told the same story, about how the shipscat had taken down their tangle-fields and fled. Once in the basement of the building—after scattering the multiple nests of kreshta that had moved right in—the Com Officer took over while the rest of them found whatever they could to make a barricade and Dick related what he had learned and what his surmises were. Power controls were all down here; there would be no way short of blowing the building up for the TriStar goons to cut power to the com. Now all they needed was time—time to get their message out, and wait for the Patrol to answer.

But time just might be in very short supply, Dick told himself as he grabbed a sheet of reflective insulation to use as a crude stun-shield. And as if in answer to that, just as the Com Officer got the link warmed up and began to send, Erica called out from the staircase.

"*Front and center—here they come!*"

Dick slumped down so that the tiny medic could reach his head to bandage it. He knew he looked like he'd been through a war, but either the feeling of elated triumph or the medic's drugs or both prevented him from really feeling any of his injuries. In the end, it had come down to the crudest of hand-to-hand combat on the staircase, as the Com Officer resent the message as many times as he could and the rest of them held off the TriStar bullies. He could only thank the Spirits of Space that they had no weapons stronger than stunners—or at least, they hadn't wanted to use them down in the basement where so many circuits lay bare. Eventually, of course, they had been overwhelmed, but by then it was too late. The Com Officer had gotten a reply from the Patrol. Help was on the way. Faced with the collapse of their plan, the TriStar people had done the only wise thing. They had retreated.

With them, they had taken all evidence that they *were* from TriStar; there was no way of proving who and what they were, unless the Patrol corvette now on the way in could intercept them and capture them. Contrary to what the Gray Man had thought, Erica had recognized none of her captors.

But right now, none of that mattered. What did matter was that *they* had come through this—and that SKitty had finally reappeared as soon as the TriStar ship blasted out, to take her accustomed place on Dick's shoulders, purring for all she was worth and interfering with the medic's work.

"Dick—" Vena called from the door to the medic's office, "I found your—"

Dick looked up. Vena was cradling SKitty in her arms.

But SKitty was already on his shoulders.

She must have looked just as stunned as he did, but he recovered first, doing a double-take. *His* SKitty was the one on her usual perch—Vena's SKitty was a little thinner, a little taller—

And most *definitely* had a lot longer tail!

:Is Prrreet,: SKitty said with satisfaction. *:Handsome, no? Is bred for being Patrol-cat, war-cat.:*

"Vena, what's the tattoo inside that cat's ear?" he asked, urgently. She checked.

"FX-003," she said, "and a serial number. But the X designation is for experimental, isn't it?"

"Uh—yeah." He got up, ignoring the medic, and came to look at the new cat. Vena's stranger also had much more human-like hands than his SKitty; suddenly the mystery of how the cat had managed to manipulate the tangle-field controls was solved.

Shoot, he might even have been trained *to do that!*

:Yes,: SKitty said simply. *:I go play catch-me-stupid, he open human-cages. He hear of me on station, come to see me, be mate. I think I keep him.:*

Dick closed his eyes for a moment. Somewhere, there was a frantic BioTech station trying to figure out where one of their experimentals had gone. He *should* turn the cat over to them!

:No,: SKitty said positively. *:No look. Is deaf one ear; is pet. Run away, find me.:*

"He uh—must have come in as an extra with that shipment," Dick improvised quickly. "I found an extra invoice, I just thought they'd made a mistake. He's deaf in one ear, that's why they washed him out. I uh—I suppose *Brightwing* could keep him."

"I was kind of hoping I could—" Vena began, and flushed, lowering her eyes. "I suppose I still could . . . after this, the embassy is going to have to have a full staff with Patrol guards and a real Consul. They won't need me anymore."

Dick began to grin, as he realized what Vena was saying. "Well, he will need a handler. And I have all I can do to take care of *this* SKitty."

:Courting?: SKitty asked slyly, reaching out to lick one of Prrreet's

ears.

This time Dick did not bother to deny it.